

February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2003

12:30-1:50 Panel on Processes for Community Involvement

Public Comments Presented by the Safe Water Coalition:

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## **Why Recycled Water Mandates Failed in Redwood City?**

### **Overview**

Treated wastewater (Recycled Water) has been on the drawing board in Redwood City for some time and consequently, the neighborhood of Redwood Shores was chosen as a pilot due to its proximity to SBSA's treatment plant. As many of you know, a pilot project was initiated in the median strips. These controlled areas of landscaping were "tested" to see if the project was feasible and more importantly to continue with the state grant process. The pilot was the right step to gain community acceptance but it did not lead to involvement among the community. Instead, it was used as "proof" that recycled water was a success and safe in a controlled environment. As a result it was perceived as unsuccessful in the minds of residents because of the lack of upfront buy-in and input. Furthermore, community leaders were not proactively involved early in any of the Recycled Water project planning. An over usage of consultants as surrogates to the process, led to a misreading of public perception and resistance.

When the scare tactics of drought and Hetch Hetchy shortage failed, the city finally admitted to an affordable housing agenda. After much research, residents discovered a "hidden agenda" to support developers who were looking to add 2700 units of housing projects with a median price of \$500K. Resident concluded that this was an issue of health and taxes versus profits and not one of affordable housing.

***The net result was the city passing a 5-2 resolution to keep recycled water mandates off the table and the usage of treated wastewater would be optional for existing homes and homeowner associations.*** Without the subscriber base, the project is at risk from the state cuts and subscriber base requirements for bond funding. Concurrently, the community is still empowered to seek protection for its schools and parks.

If the city forces recycled water in our children's schoolyard, that means, the quality our family life will be different. Why would anyone allow their child to be exposed to recycled water in our schoolyards if we will not allow our children to be exposed to recycled water in our own front yard? Most concerned moms have already agreed they will be adamant about this issue when the time comes.

### **Treat people with respect**

So let me share with you some background. Nine months ago, myself and one other resident only were sitting at the first public information session. We were curious as to what all the fuss around recycled water was about. So we went and were treated to a discussion by the public works director of all the benefits regarding recycled water. We were told that there were no drawbacks. No risks. The state regulated everything and they followed or exceeded those standards.

I started asking questions regarding health and safety. Instead of clear-cut answers, I received "non-answers". The other guy in the room asked about cost, and they said it would be a \$40M project. We asked about taxes, they said no increases if made mandatory. We asked for choice and got a laugh. Adding insult to injury, I was told that it'd be made mandatory anyways and that my neighbors and I would have no choice. We were furious! We had not heard the other side of the issue.

**Lesson learned:** One person can make a difference, especially someone like me who is inquisitive and believes in her cause. Take the time to engage and address concerns of all people. Do not

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“gloss over” the issues. If you treat people with respect, you won’t alienate them. You won’t enrage them but engage them. You seem genuine. Involve community leaders early in the process. Involvement includes input in decisions and decision-making. Don’t go against the wishes of the community.

### **Inconsistencies, credibility, and the truth.**

So from that point on, the city began its PR campaign thinking all was fine except 2 loonies out there. However, as time went on we were faced with many inconsistencies in messages over the course of the effort. Here are some examples:

1. The city sells recycled water to pilot customers at a discount and tells us it will be cheaper. They tell all our property managers as well.

Then months later we hear that recycled water should cost the same as “fresh” water.

2. The city tells us that rates won’t go up. No taxes.

Then the city tells you that our residential water rates will go up by 8% every year for 5 years to pay for the recycled water project that we don’t even want safe or unsafe. We also will float a bond that is also a “tax”.

3. The city tells us that we need this for a drought like the one we had in the 80’s. Nice scare tactic.

Then, we find out from the State that something like this doesn’t happen for 50 to 100 years

4. The city tells us that this project is not being done to appease developers.

Then, we find out the developers are willing to add \$7M to the pot and that several projects of 1900 homes, and 500 homes are pending this outcome.

5. The city tells us that the project is needed because we are over our Hetch Hetchy allocation by 1000 acre-feet. Nice scare tactic. We agree and ask for conservation programs that will address this. Including Indoor usage rebates (e.g. low flow toilets) as well as irrigation conservation (e.g. weather based ET).

Yet, they provide no input and move forward with recycled water.

**Lesson learned:** Your credibility is the only thing you have to build trust. Be honest and upfront about your intentions. Residents aren’t as dumb as they look =). People inherently mistrust government. We want to know the background and true intentions. Drought is a non-issue compared to health. Our grass can go brown so long the kids are safe. If the real reason is developer driven and we can conserve to meet our goals, let us decide. Involve us in those trade-off decisions.

### **Do not bias information**

In September the city had decided to address the outrage in our community by holding a second public information forum. This was definitely a great idea in concept. By then, we had 700 petitions and the support of a good number of Home Owners Associations. Community leaders were outraged and momentum was building. Anxiety was reaching peak levels.

Instead of bringing a balanced panel, our public works director had scheduled a complete panel of pro-recycled water individuals covering landscaping, health, cost, and implementation. If we had not pushed hard with the help of our councilwoman, we would not have heard balanced testimony from

those who were aware of the risks. Furthermore, a majority of the panelists had financial incentives from such projects as consultants, experts, or potential contracts at stake.

Without our panelists there, we wouldn't have addressed the soil issues that afflict filled land communities of high salinity content, pharmaceutical waste issues, and related pending environmental lawsuits among many other health related topics. All we would have heard would have been the benefits. Allowing us to invite experts after the fact was a nice gesture but by not being upfront we were even more suspicious.

**Lesson learned:** Actively seek balanced input in information sessions. A very one-sided debate and discussion only adds to the criticism and suspicion of the public. Let's discuss the merits and not promote the cause. ***Seek suggested expert speakers from the community.*** Keep the ratio balanced. Choose a neutral moderator. Our was given a mission that was biased.

### **Conclusions and Suggestions**

Be cognizant of a community's concerns. They are real whether it be public perception and the impact to property values, mistrust of government standards, health concerns, and/or despise for tax increases. Though we may not be "experts", we are interested in having an opportunity to choose our destiny. Do not misread this as a lack of support. It is just part of the healthy discourse that will lead to cleaner and safer environments and safe usages of recycled water through involvement.

In the spirit of such dialogue, we would like to make these additional community involvement principles for the public record based on our experiences:

1). **NO Mandates:** Recycled water should not be mandated or forced in any residential areas especially when the neighborhood was not developed with recycled water to begin with. There should be no such thing as "Mandatory Ordinance" to existing homes. Residents should have choice in their communities as they make informed decisions. Residents who choose recycled water should also be able to change their minds as additional information is gathered.

2). **Involve Early:** Projects should involve community leader input and feedbacks in the early stages of any developed recycled water project. This way issues are aired out early and an action plan to resolve these issues are public and timely. Input should not be paid "lip-service". They should address issues in a meaningful and constructive way.

3). **Conduct adequate and on-going research:** In November, Metropolitan Water Board member, Bill Robinson asked the Task Force to form a panel of scientists to investigate and research "emerging contaminants". Bill Robinson has also asked for a "screening panel" for estrogen on endocrine disruptors. We understand that Federal has this screening panel, and we would like your support the Ca. state to form one as well to parallel with the Federal.

4) **Support Sustainable Growth Policies:** Communities should proactively avoid water shortages through indoor conservation and irrigation conservation. Thus, for new developments, all developers should state clearly in writing in early stage as where they are going to get their source of water to build their project, and if there are any concerns from the existing residential communities. Recycled water should be used as a last resort, not a means to expand dependence on pure water supplies or impact residential areas for the sake of profits over health.

In all honesty, cities or regional bodies who take into consideration these lessons learned will find the process less contentious and more rewarding. A side benefit is the ability to address community issues as we look towards a way to address our water supply issues. Together we can meet the needs for our commercial and industrial users and satisfy residential user concerns.

We have reached that point with Redwood City and now are working in a more cooperative and involved process. Without a City Council that was sensitive enough to address these issues and take the leadership to give residents a choice on recycled water, we would not be here today. We hope to continue in this spirit of cooperation and community involvement.